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SUBJECT: KUWAITI BLOGS AND OTHER INTERNET TRENDS

¶1. (U) Summary and comment: Like young people elsewhere around the world, the daily lives of Kuwait's youth often center around friends, music, and movies. Internet trends in Kuwait reflect these priorities as social networking, instant messaging, and music and video websites are often the most frequented by young Kuwaitis. Blogs continue to proliferate in Kuwait, but their popularity and readership depends on the level of interest in issues of the day. Although still a window into the minds of young Kuwaitis, blogs offered more substantive commentary a year ago when Kuwait saw a parliamentary election that focused on reform, corruption, and women's participation for the first time. A review of recent postings on Kuwait-based blogs reveals criticism of both parliament and the government over corruption and the slow pace of democratic reform. Looming electricity and water shortages draw the ire of many Kuwaiti bloggers who unanimously blame corruption and government incompetence for these disruptions of daily life. Women's issues on many levels continue to inspire commentary. End summary and comment.

Blog Use Depends on Issue of the Day

¶2. (U) Kuwaiti blogs have not been immune to the effects of their proliferation, content and competition from other websites for reader attention. When blog sites first appeared on the scene several years ago they enjoyed the spotlight as the "in" forum for social interaction and expression. Today, blogs remain part of the Kuwaiti cyber scene, but are less in vogue than in the past. Many blogs that Post monitored regularly during the summer of 2006 for glimpses of public opinion, especially the opinion of youth (note: sixty-nine percent of Kuwaitis are under the age of 25), no longer exist or have not been recently updated. Kuwaiti parliamentary elections in June 2006 -- in which women voted and ran for office for the first time -- as well as the war in Lebanon in July and August, fueled a proliferation of postings on Kuwaiti blogs. This summer's issues by comparison -- the grilling by parliament of the Minister of Energy for alleged corruption and expected electricity and water shortages -- appear to be less compelling.

¶3. (U) For example, this time last year the blog site was filled with comments on the Kuwaiti election campaign and commentary from female voters heading to the polls for the first time. Today, it contains comments on dating and links to amusing YouTube videos, although political commentary is not entirely absent from the site. There is scathing condemnation of the recent passage by parliament of a law prohibiting women from working past 8:00 p.m.

¶4. (U) Most blogger comments on current political issues focus on the government and parliament, including the countdown to the June 25 grilling by Parliament of Kuwait's Oil Minister Sheikh Ali Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah for his alleged involvement in a corruption scandal. One such commentator at criticizes the minister for having "confessed that he is not qualified to maintain public funds." Another on expresses frustration over the potential outcome following weeks of debate by complaining that "half of the MPs haven't even decided what their stances are to the grilling."

Criticism of parliament was the topic of an entry at the blog site where a writer charged the National Assembly with "impeding development of the country." The author supported this argument by posting footage of a day in June 2006 when the Speaker of the National Assembly banned the Kuwaiti public from entering the parliament building to show their support for electoral reform.

15. (U) Something that affects Kuwaitis directly during summer time - electricity cuts - was widely discussed on many of the blogs. They is heavy on criticism of the government for its mishandling of the country's energy needs. A writer at the blog lambasted the government for "plundering public funds" while pointing out that the electricity and water shortages are due to the lack of investment in new power stations and water plants.

16. (U) Women's issues are frequently touched upon. The site included the venting of a Kuwait woman indignant to find out that only her husband's signature and not hers could give parental consent for the government to process a college scholarship for their son. She went on to criticize a system that does not recognize the equal authority of mothers over their children.

Meeting Friends and Finding News Online

17. (U) Blog sites are just one genre of internet offerings that attract Kuwait's youth. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are extremely popular for meeting new people and interacting with friends. Facebook, one of the newest such sites, has more than 9,000 profiles in Kuwait that include basic information such as the person's age,

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sex, and nationality. While most participants keep their identity hidden, a surprising number have photos. Besides profiles, the site offers discussion boards where members can chat about issues. Most of the chat however focuses on the mundane such as "How people dress to go to the mall," and "What's under her hijab?" where posts contain "humorous" speculation on what women wear under their hijabs.

18. (U) Facebook was the topic of a lengthy feature article in the June 21 edition of the English-language daily Kuwait Times. The well known site MySpace is also popular in Kuwait. It's 3,000 plus Kuwaiti profiles, however, appear to be predominantly American residents, but locals can also be found. MySpace's largest Kuwait-based group, with some 125 members, are alumni of the American School of Kuwait.

19. (U) Local news is also available on the Internet. Most of the daily newspapers, Arabic and English language, have on-line editions. The Arab Times and Al-Qabas are two examples. The state news agency KUNA has a continuously updated posting of its news in English and Arabic at . Of the news services that are exclusively online, two stand out. The online news magazine Elaph, which is headquartered in the UK, carries news from the wire services and from other writers throughout the GCC. Sometimes sensationalist, it can also feature unconfirmed and unsubstantiated stories. It is a popular source of news and gossip for the public and, in particular, Kuwaiti reporters. Al-Aan is the first Kuwaiti online magazine and is another source of both official and unofficial reports of events in Kuwait. At present its reports focus mostly on the grilling of the oil minister.

What's on Those Laptop Computer Screens?

110. (U) An evening visit to a caf in Kuwait's popular Salmiya district offered a glimpse of some of the sites most frequented by Kuwaiti youth on the web. Whether alone or huddled around a table with friends, most customers were chatting on MSN or Yahoo instant

messaging. Music and video websites also filled a number of laptop screens. Twenty-two year-old Abdullah was looking at clips of comedians on YouTube while at the same time chatting with friends and classmates on MSN, many of whom were already in Egypt or the UK on summer vacation. He also uses YouTube to view music videos. Another group of young friends in their 20s were downloading Arabic music on sharefile programs that offer free pirated music, movies and TV programs. They pointed to the site Ares as one of many such filesharing sites that they use for this purpose. This group said that they never pay for music or movies and instead spend much time surfing sharefile sites for items to add to their sizable collections. Their outbreak of laughter when asked about the ethics of such practices for a moment drew the attention of the entire caf. Other popular sites to listen to Arabic music or view videos are Salmiya at and 6arab at . Most customers said that they sometimes follow the blogs of friends, or will logon to a site referred by friends if there were something interesting or amusing to read. Only one youth interviewed said that he consulted online news sources. His preferred sites were KUNA and the Arab-language newspapers.

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